



WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT RACE?

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What does the Bible say about race? This presentation will explore that question by looking at the social, economic, political, cultural, religious, and historical issues concerning race and ethnicity, and highlight the contributions light brown and black people made in the ancient biblical world. I hope to very broadly describe the main ethnic groups that appear in the scriptures, so that we as Christian Social Workers might better understand the context from which biblical ethnic references are made.

According to E.S. Hall (1954: 1), integration, race-mixing, mongrelizing, and mixed breeds are the sins of immoral people of both the black and white races. In his compilation of Old and New Testament text, it was and is God's will for the races to be separate and for black people to be the slaves of white people.

In this self-published document Hall states that, “On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court made a terrible mistake in its ruling to force race-mixing which has been immoral from the beginning of time and still is.” He then shares 23 pages of scriptural text, from Genesis to Revelations, to argue that this decision, violates white people's right to freedom of religion. I might add, it also violates white people's freedom to be oppressive, bigoted, and racist as well.

According to J. Daniel Hays (2003), applying a Western European and North American ‘cultural pre-understanding’ into the scriptural interpretive and applicational process is difficult to overcome. The individuals in the Bible have been portrayed as Anglo-Europeans or North Americans for hundreds of years. Examples include, Ramesses II and Nefertiti, Jesus and God, King David, King Solomon, Queen Esther, the Sistine Chapel, blue-eyed Jeffrey Hunter as Jesus, George C. Scott as Moses, Richard Harris as Abraham, Charlton Heston as Moses and John the Baptist; the characters in the latest movie, “Gods of Egypt” and of course the Last Supper.

So, what did Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) people look like? What did ancient Israelites actually look like? The physical appearance of Israelites was probably very similar to their neighbors in and around the ANE. Most serious theological scholars (while claiming to be historically objective) know that few, if any, of the characters of the Old Testament looked European or North American and yet, they allowed these images to be projected back on the people of the Bible while clear portrayals of light brown and black people are all but ignored. It is most likely that none of the Israelites looked white. These Caucasian images have played a powerful role in shaping popular perceptions about the Bible which in turn have a serious impact on the theology of the Church. Therefore the message given to the church, both through Hollywood and serious scholarly work, is that

there was a significant white involvement in the biblical story but no light brown or black involvement (Hays 2003; Felder 1991; Brueggemann 1982; Sadler 2005).

It is important for social workers, pastors, and church goers to open their minds, and eyes to the fact that the people of the Old and New Testament World did not look like people of Western Europe or North America. Or as Hays (2003: 34) states, “For Anglo-European Christian readers, it is critical to come to grips with the fact that these people were not blue-eyed, blond-haired Caucasians; they did not look like White Americans or White Britons.” They were light brown, brown, and black people.

Felder (1991) posits that the ancient text does not have theories about race or definitions of race. Scripture is pregnant with the fact that light brown, dark-skinned, and black people were politically, socially, culturally, economically, religiously, and numerically dominant in the ancient world and were the fathers and mothers of the three so-called western religions and civilized society as we know it today (McKissic, 1990; Hays 2003; Felder 1991). From the time of Noah after the flood to the conquest of the known world by the Greeks, black people were one of the best kept secrets in the Bible.

In examining the black presence in the Bible, a good place to start is where the racist starts, the family of Noah (Gen. 6:9), the so-called, “curse of Ham” (Gen 9:18-28), and the seventy nations of the world (Gen. 10:1-32). Noah had three sons

Shem, Ham, and Japheth and the author of the story makes it clear that Ham is the “Father of Canaan”. According to scripture, from these three the whole Human Family (Table of Nations) will spread over the whole world (earth), (Gen. 10:19). This table documents the migration of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Historically, Christian, Talmudic Judaism, and Arab writers viewed the “curse of Ham” one way, while Rabbinical Judaism viewed the curse another way. The “Curse of Ham’ has been employed at various times, by white Christians:

To fight racial equality,

To validate racial divisions, and

To justify the hypothesis that African people were cursed” (Hays 2003; Sadler 2005; Felder 1991; Hertz 1960).

This passage was used by the antebellum south of the United States to justify and defend the enslavement of Black Africans. That the fulfillment of the curse was and is God’s will. This is one of the most grave and most destructive misinterpretations of Scripture on the issue of race in the Holy Writ. No passage of Scripture has suffered more abuse (Hays 2003; Sadler 2005; Felder 1991). To this day churches teach about the “curse of Ham” using books and commentaries that are reprinted and for sale through popular distributors such as Amazon, Christian Book Distributors, and Barnes and Noble.

According to the Hebrew Bible (2004), The Jewish Study Bible 2004, and the Pentateuch & Haftorahs (1960), it is “Canaan” who is cursed (Gen. 9:25) by Noah although Ham propagated the outrage. Noah never cursed Ham. The curse is really a prediction of the future, that the Canaanites would be a subservient and sullied ethnic group. According to the Pentateuch & Haftorahs, the curse pronounced by Noah against Canaan was accomplished when the Israelites subsequently exterminated the Canaanites in the conquests. Because the Israelites and Canaanites were similar in culture, language, and appearance, the curse had absolutely nothing to do with race. Massive damage has been done to the Christian Church in America by those who have used and still use this scripture to justify slavery and defend theories of superiority (Felder (1991); Hays (2003)).

In Hebrew the word “Ham,” means “warm” or “hot”. It is also an Egyptian word meaning “black”. In Hebrew the word “Japheth,” means “fair”, or “light”. In Hebrew the word “Shem,” means "dusky, olive colored" (Hays, 2003; The Jewish Study Bible, 2004; Sadler 2005). All three have been misinterpreted to represent different races. “Thus Japheth represents the White or Caucasian race, Ham the Black race, and Shem the Semitic race” (Hays 2003: 56). Many serious theologians argue that Genesis 10 does not organize the world into racial categories based on the color of one’s skin (Sarna 1989; Brueggemann 1982: 91-92; von Rad 1961: 136; Crusemann 1996: 66). Sarna (1989) argues, “Racial characteristics, physical

types, or the color of skin play no role in categorizing.” Felder (1991) reports that the authors of the Bible awareness of color/race were not based on politics, economic or social standing, or viewing people in an unfavorable way, with the intent to enslave or oppress them.

Israel was not ethnically monolithic. It was made up of Aramean, Amorite, Canaanite, Cushite, Egyptian, and numerous other ethnic ethnicities, who intermarried, becoming part of the people of God. All from light brown to black. They were formed into a nation by God and brought out of Egypt and bound themselves to him through the covenant. Black and brown people are an integral part of the biblical story. The historical perception of many white people, that the biblical story is a story about white people, is wrong. The Torah is replete with ethnic diversity and none of those people are white (Hays 2003).

What we know is Black Africa had more influence on the Ancient Near East than it is given credit for. The country of Cush, a Black African nation, is south of Egypt along the Nile River. The Old Testament and history reports that Cush played a major role in the geopolitical and military history of the ANE (Hays 1998, Sadler 2005; Felder 1991). Zephaniah the prophet was from Cush (Zephaniah 1:1). Ebed-Melech Jeremiah 9 and 10 was from Cush.

Two-thousand years before Christ and one-thousand years before the Davidic Monarchy, Cush and Egypt fought against and with one another. Cushites

even served in David's army (2 Samuel 18:19-33). Though nothing in the text suggest he is a slave, numerous writers have a tendency to imply that all Blacks that appear in Scripture are slaves (Smith, 1899; Kirkpatrick, 1890; Bergen, 1996; and Evans, 2000). The quick jump to this conclusion is born out of white superiority.

If White people were to trace the migration of Shem, Ham, and Japheth and their descendants through the pages of sacred text, they would be surprised to discover that most of the people of the Bible were Black people. The Old Testament, specifically, reflected a wide range of ethnic diversity not racial diversity. Few, if any of these people, looked like northern, southern, eastern, western, or mid-western Americans. In the multi-ethnic Old Testament, the groups mentioned the most included Israel, Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Cushites, Egyptians, Philistines, and Hittites (Hays 2003; Sadler 2005; Felder 1991).

It is important for White Western and White North American Christianity to know that their strong historical tendency to be ethnocentric; that projecting Caucasian people back into bible, is a gross distortion of all aspects of the biblical story. Coming to grips with the non-Caucasian cultural context of the Old Testament, means acknowledging its multi-ethnic nature, and is a first step toward a biblical theology of race.

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